RAMAN THE MATCHLESS WIT



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RAMAN
THE MATCHLESS WIT

C.M. Vitankar

The triumph of the little man over the mighty is a recurring theme in literature. Sometimes he does it with a sling and stone, but more often, like Tenali Raman, with nimble wit. He was a Telugu poet and the court jester of Krishnadeva Raya (1509-1529), the emperor of Vijayanagara. Tenali Raman was the Birbal of the South and many stories which have passed into folk-lore, are attributed to him. Some of these are obviously invented to show his ready wit.

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RAMAN THE MATCHLESS WIT



MAHARAJ, I CHALLENGE THE SCHOLARS AT YOUR COURT TO A DEBATE IN ANY BRANCH OF KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR CHOICE.

THE COURT WOULD BE HONOURED TO TAKE UP THE CHALLENGE.

BUT PANDITRAJ, THE LEARNED COURT SCHOLAR, WAS FAR FROM FEELING HONOURED. LATER, WHEN THEY WERE ALONE—

MAHARAJ, WE DARE NOT ACCEPT THE CHALLENGE. I DON'T STAND A CHANCE. NO SCHOLAR IN THE LAND DOES!

DO YOU MEAN TO SAY THERE IS NO ONE HERE WHO CAN FACE HIM IN A DEBATE?

YOU DO, MAHARAJ. I'LL DO IT—THIS VERY EVENING.

IT WAS RAMAN OF TENALI, THE KING'S FAVOURITE AND PANDITRAJ'S DESPAIR.


THANK YOU, RAMAN. BUT SCHOLARSHIP IS SCHOLARSHIP AND WIT — WIT. I TRUST YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TAKING ON.
I DO, MAHARAJ.

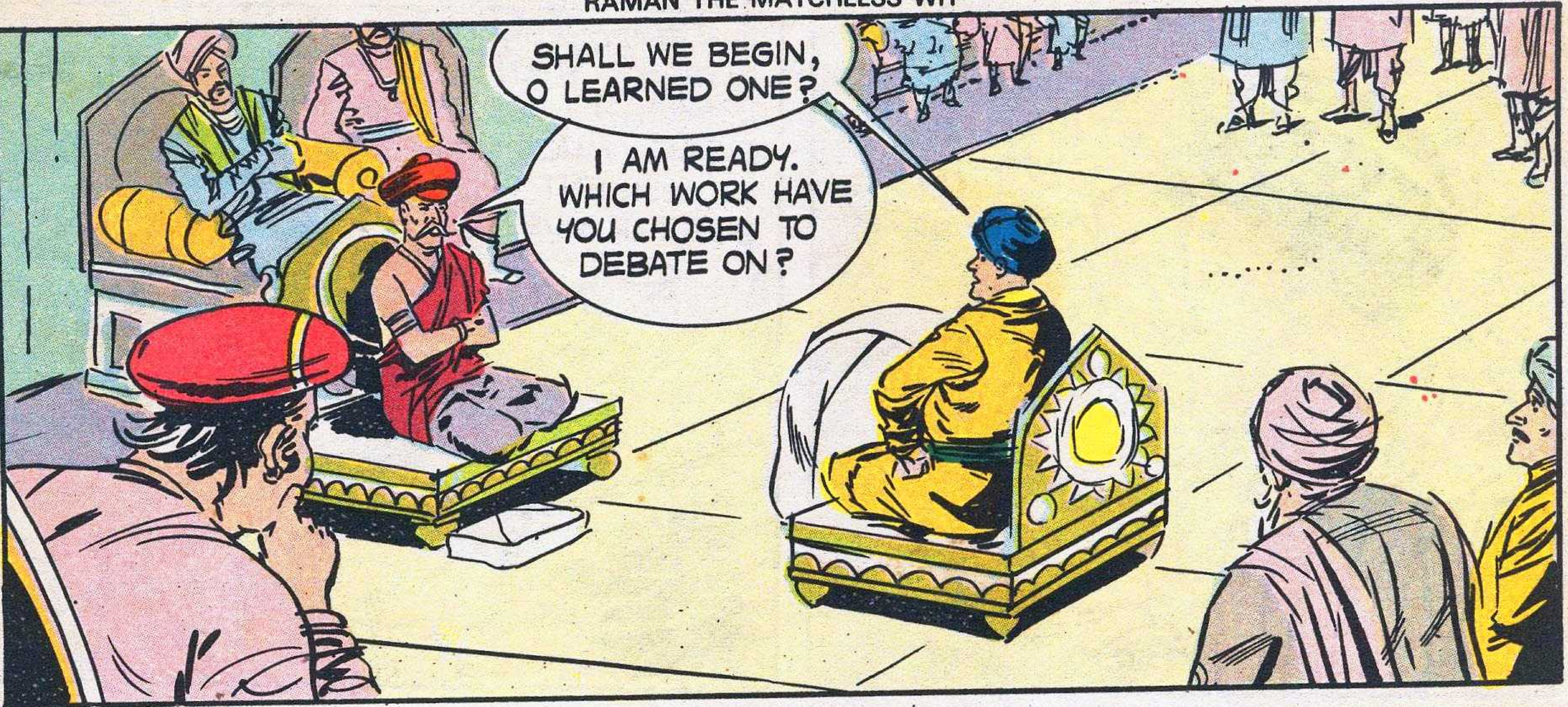

HE DOESN'T! HE'LL SHAME US! MAHARAJ, WE CAN'T...
PANDITRAJ ! HAVE ARRANGEMENTS MADE FOR THE DEBATE THIS EVENING.


THAT EVENING —
ONE OF OUR MOST LEARNED SCHOLARS, HAS ACCEPTED YOUR CHALLENGE.
HERE HE COMES WITH HIS DISCIPLES.

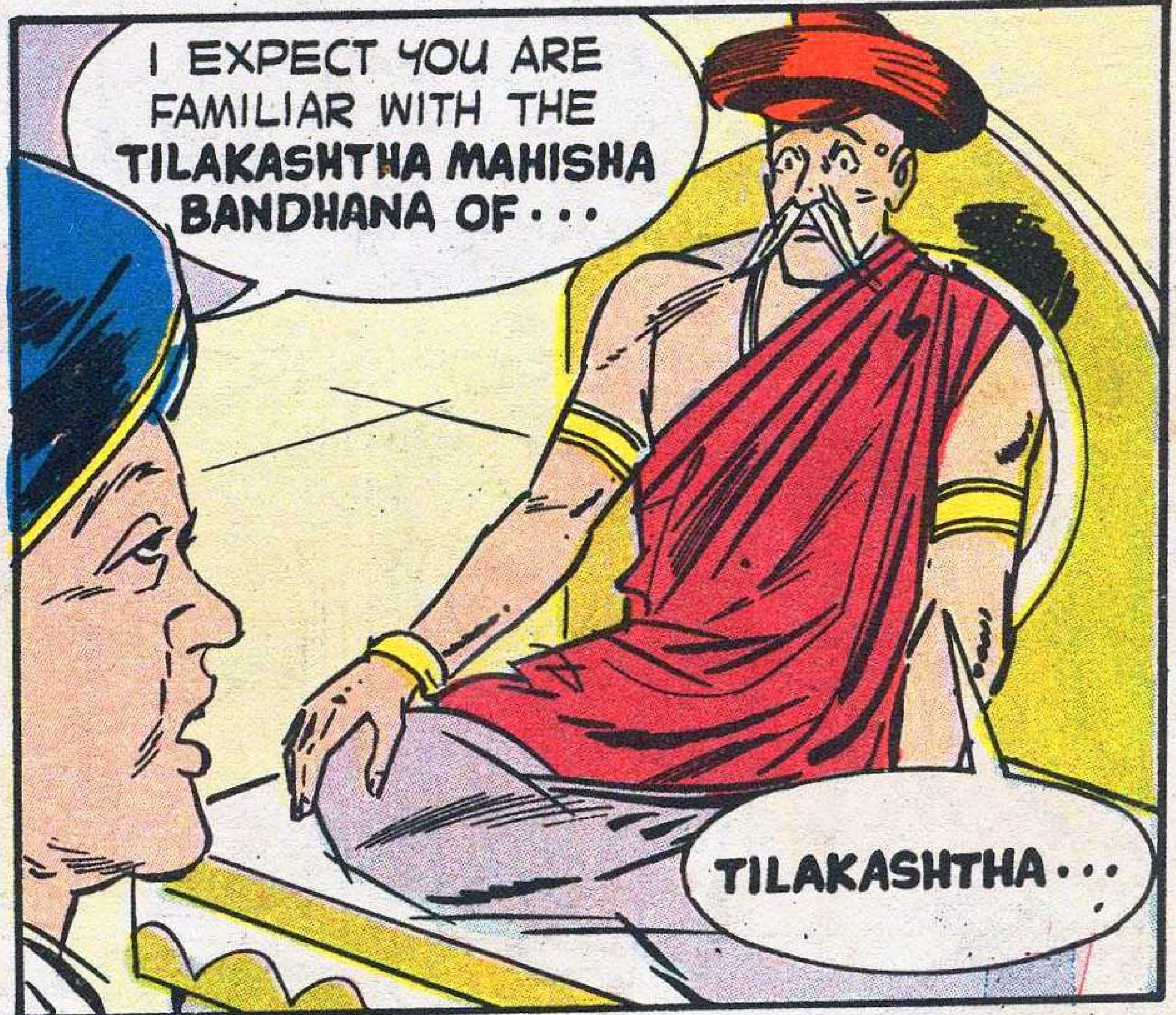



WELL, RAMAN, MUCH AS I DISLIKE YOU, I'D HATE TO BE IN YOUR SHOES!

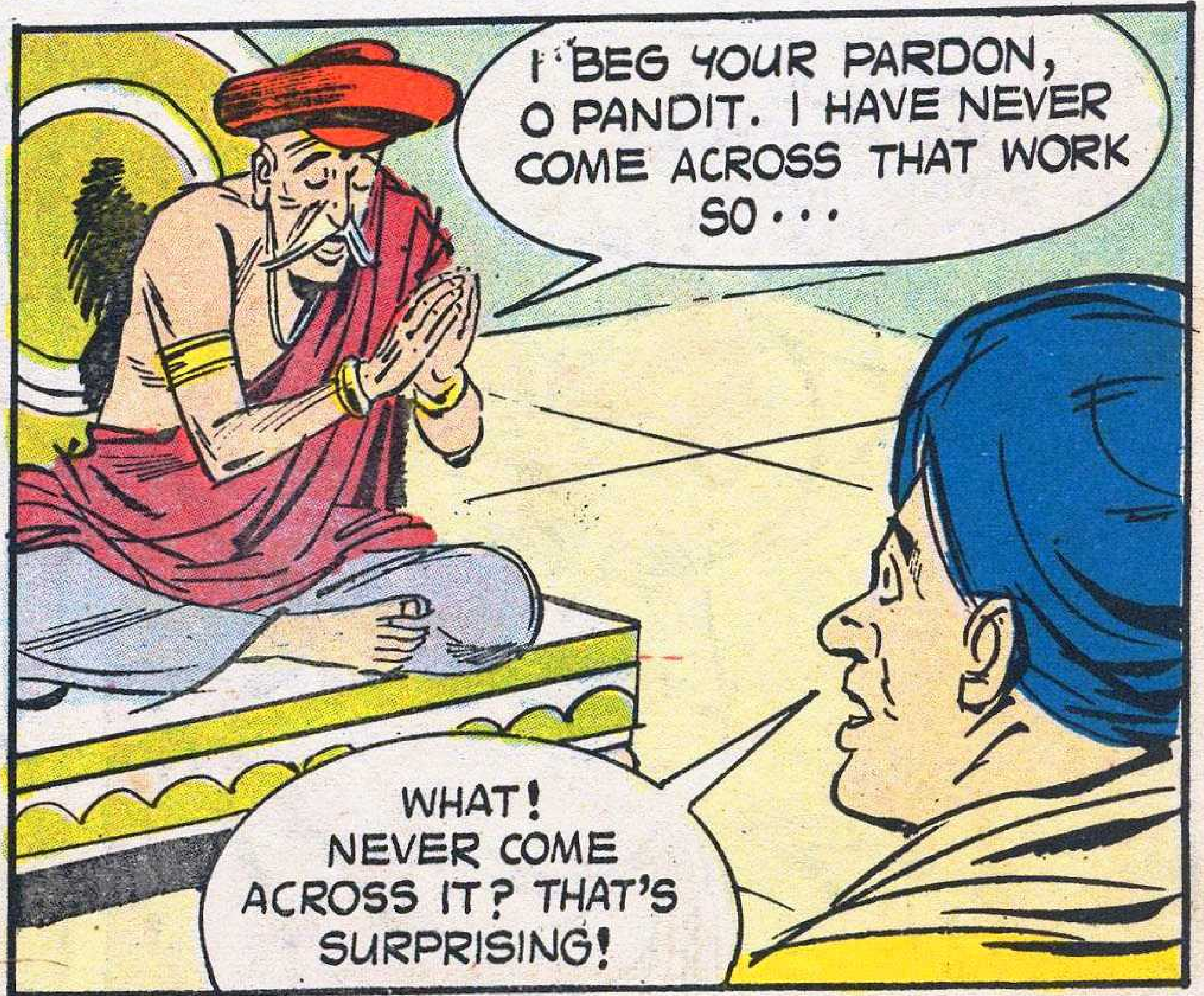

PLEASE PLACE THAT BUNDLE OF MANUSCRIPTS HERE.


SHALL WE BEGIN, O LEARNED ONE?
I AM READY. WHICH WORK HAVE YOU CHOSEN TO DEBATE ON?


LET'S BEGIN WITH A SIMPLE ONE.


I EXPECT YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE TILAKASHTHA MAHISHA BANDHANA OF...
TILAKASHTHA...

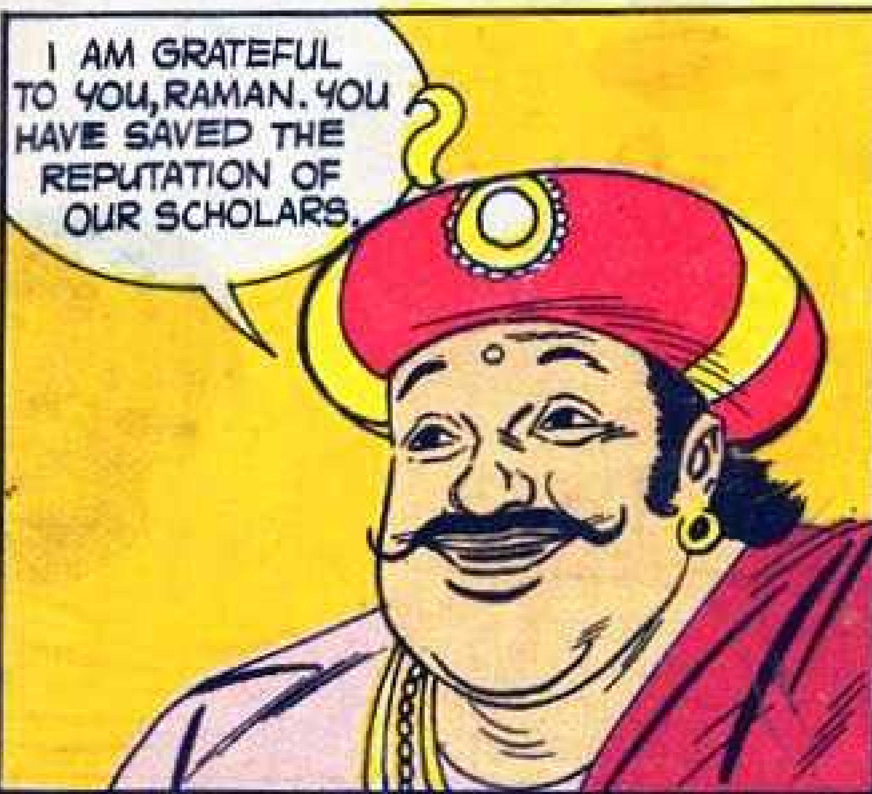

...MAHISHA BANDHANA... TILAKASHTHA? NO. I AM NOT.


I BEG YOUR PARDON, O PANDIT. I HAVE NEVER COME ACROSS THAT WORK SO...
WHAT! NEVER COME ACROSS IT? THAT'S SURPRISING!


WHY, EVEN COWHERDS IN OUR CITY ARE FAMILIAR WITH IT!


IF MERE COWHERDS IN THIS CITY KNOW WHAT I HAVEN'T EVEN HEARD OF, HOW MUCH MORE INTELLIGENT THIS SCHOLAR MUST BE!

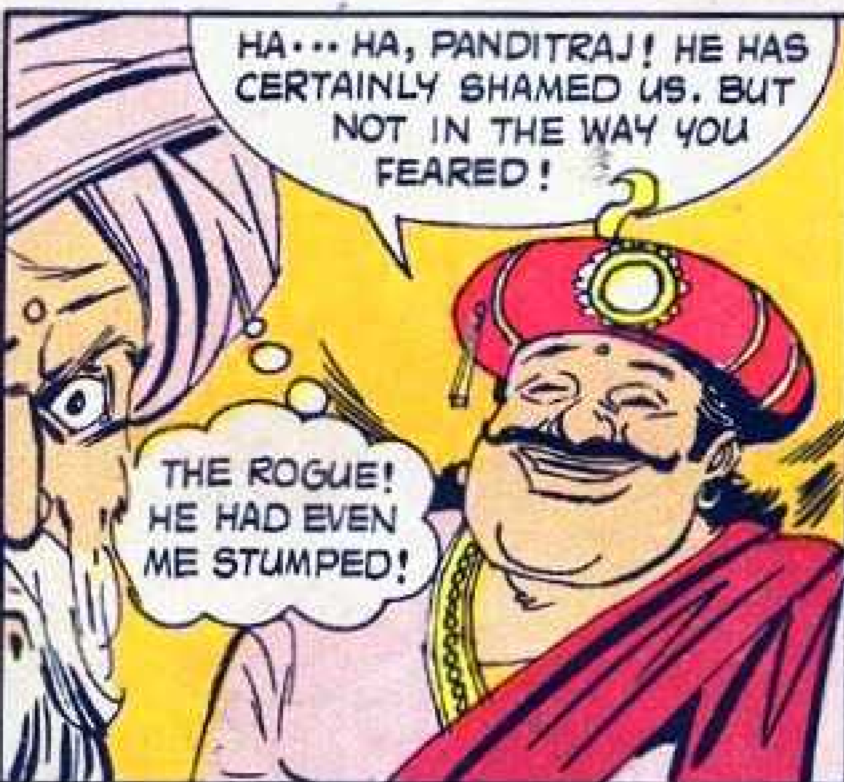

I ACCEPT DEFEAT, O LEARNED ONE. PARDON MY ARROGANCE. THERE IS MUCH I HAVE YET TO LEARN.
AND THE HUMBLE SCHOLAR LEFT THE COURT.

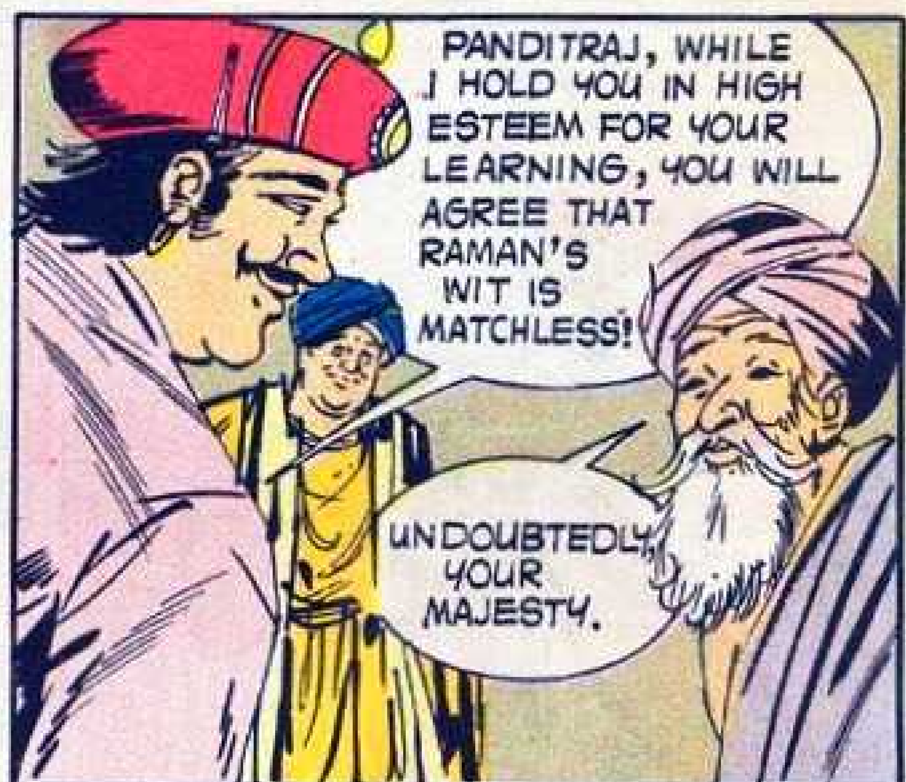

I AM GRATEFUL TO YOU, RAMAN. YOU HAVE SAVED THE REPUTATION OF OUR SCHOLARS.


I'M CURIOUS. WHAT IS THIS GREAT WORK YOU SPOKE ABOUT? I MUST CONFESS THAT I TOO HAVEN'T HEARD OF IT!


RAMAN THEN UN-COVERED HIS BUNDLE.
THESE ARE THE TILAKASHTHAS — STALKS OF THE SESAME PLANT...


...WHICH I HAVE TIED TOGETHER WITH A MAHISHA BANDHANA — THE ROPE WITH WHICH BUFFALOES ARE TETHERED. SIMPLE ISN'T IT?


HA... HA, PANDITRAJ! HE HAS CERTAINLY SHAMED US. BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU FEARED!
THE ROGUE! HE HAD EVEN ME STUMPED!


PANDITRAJ, WHILE I HOLD YOU IN HIGH ESTEEM FOR YOUR LEARNING, YOU WILL AGREE THAT RAMAN'S WIT IS MATCHLESS!
UNDOUBTEDLY, YOUR MAJESTY.


AS RAMAN WALKED AWAY THOUGH —
TILAKASHTHA MAHISHA BANDHANA, INDEED! I'LL BIDE MY TIME TO HAVE MY REVENGE.

HE DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG.

PANDITRAJ, TOMORROW IS MY MOTHER'S DEATH ANNIVERSARY. I FEEL SAD WHEN I THINK OF HER.

YOU SHOULDN'T, MAHARAJ. THAT WHICH IS BORN HAS TO DIE.

THAT I HAVE ACCEPTED. I FEEL SAD BECAUSE I COULD NOT FULFIL HER LAST WISH.

WHAT WAS THE WISH A MONARCH COULD NOT FULFIL?

HER CRAVING FOR MANGOES. BUT IT WAS NOT THE MANGO SEASON. NO AMOUNT OF GOLD COULD BUY A MANGO.

MANGOES! GOLD!

MAHARAJ, I AM SORRY TO SAY...

YES? SPEAK UP. PLEASE DON'T HESITATE.

YOUR MOTHER DIED WITH AN UN-FULFILLED WISH. HER SOUL WILL REMAIN RESTLESS UNLESS...

UNLESS? UNLESS WHAT?

UNLESS YOU INVITE A FEW VIRTUOUS BRAHMANAS AND...

... PRESENT EACH ONE OF THEM WITH A GOLDEN MANGO.

WHY A FEW? SEND OUT INVITATIONS TO ALL THE BRAHMANAS

HERE'S WHERE I'LL HAVE MY REVENGE. I WON'T SEND AN INVITATION TO THAT ROGUE.

RAMAN HOWEVER, COULD NOT RESIST WATCHING THE WHOLE SHOW.

SO, THE BRAHMANAS WILL OBLIGE THE KING AND ACCEPT THE GOLDEN MANGOES FOR THE SAKE OF THE LATE QUEEN MOTHER'S SOUL! WELL, WELL.

AFTER THE BRAHMANAS WERE FED AND PRESENTED WITH THE GOLDEN MANGOES—

MAY GOD BLESS YOU. YOU NEED NO LONGER FEEL SAD WHEN YOU THINK OF YOUR MOTHER. HER SOUL IS NOW AT PEACE.

I AM GRATEFUL TO YOU FOR HAVING ACCEPTED MY INVITATION.


WHEN THE BRAHMANAS CAME OUT OF THE PALACE —
LEARNED ONES, TODAY IS MY MOTHER'S DEATH ANNIVERSARY, TOO. AND SHE TOO DIED WITH AN UNFULFILLED WISH.


AS YOU KNOW, HER SOUL WILL BE RESTLESS TILL A FEW VIRTUOUS BRAHMANAS AGREE TO...


WE UNDERSTAND, RAMAN. WE'LL COME.
I AM HONOURED!


THIS WAY, MY FRIENDS.
I WONDER WHAT GIFTS RAMAN IS GOING TO OFFER US.


RAMAN TOOK THEM TO THE BACKYARD OF HIS HOUSE.
COME, LET ME WASH YOUR FEET BEFORE...
WHAT ARE THEY DOING?


WHY ARE THOSE RODS BEING HEATED?


MY MOTHER DIED OF RHEUMATISM. HER LAST WISH WAS TO HAVE HER LEGS BRANDED.


BUT...
BEFORE I COULD GET THE IRONS READY, SHE DIED.


HER SOUL WILL KNOW NO PEACE UNTIL...


... I BRAND THE LEGS OF LEARNED AND DESERVING BRAHMANAS. SHALL WE BEGIN?
YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS!


YOU ARE MAD!
I AM HURT. DON'T YOU WANT MY MOTHER'S SOUL TO FIND PEACE. YOU DID HELP THE EMPEROR, SO I...


YES, RAMAN, BUT THAT WAS DIFFERENT. HERE, YOU CAN KEEP THESE. BUT DO TRY TO UNDERSTAND.


WHAT ABOUT...


...MY MOTHER'S LAST WISH?


LOOK AT THEM SCURRYING AWAY! LIKE A PACK OF RATS!


WHAT A PITY WE HAD TO PART WITH OUR MANGOES!
LET'S COMPLAIN TO THE KING AND HAVE RAMAN PUNISHED!


BUT WHEN THE KING HEARD THE STORY—
THANK YOU, RAMAN, FOR SHOWING ME WHAT A GULLIBLE FOOL I WAS!


WHAT A FOOL! HA! HA! HO! HA!
THIS IS NO LAUGHING MATTER, MAHARAJ. MEN OF LEARNING HAVE BEEN INSULTED.


AH! YES! THAT'S TRUE! I HADN'T LOOKED AT IT THAT WAY!


RAMAN SHOULD BE PUNISHED. WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?
LET HIM PAY FOR IT WITH HIS HEAD!


WELL! I'LL HUMOUR HIM, FOR I CAN TRUST RAMAN TO TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF.
GONG




TAKE RAMAN TO THE BANK OF THE TUNGABHADRA AND CUT OFF HIS HEAD WITH ONE SWEEP OF YOUR SWORD.
RID OF HIM AT LAST!


WITH ONE SWEEP OF YOUR SWORD, DID YOU SAY? WELL IF THAT'S MY FATE, I GUESS I'LL HAVE TO ACCEPT IT LIKE A MAN.


ON THE BANK OF THE TUNGABHADRA —
YOU ARE ABOUT TO DIE, RAMAN. IF YOU TELL US YOUR LAST WISH...
... WE'LL TRY AND FULFIL IT.


I WANT YOU TO PRAY WITH ME — FOR ME. PLEASE SAY YOU WILL.
OF COURSE, WE WILL, RAMAN.


I WANT YOU TO CUT OFF MY NECK THE MOMENT I CALL OUT TO MOTHER **KALI**.
WE'LL SEE THAT WE DO, RAMAN.


JUST A MINUTE. WHO WILL CUT OFF HIS HEAD? YOU OR I?
BOTH OF YOU! AT THE SAME TIME.


BOTH OF US?
YES, IF YOU MISS, YOUR FRIEND WILL GET ME. IF HE MISSES, YOU'LL GET ME.


WHAT IS IMPORTANT IS THAT I MUST DIE WITH THE NAME OF MOTHER KALI ON MY LIPS.
WE WON'T FAIL YOU, RAMAN. SHALL WE GET READY?




JAI KALI!



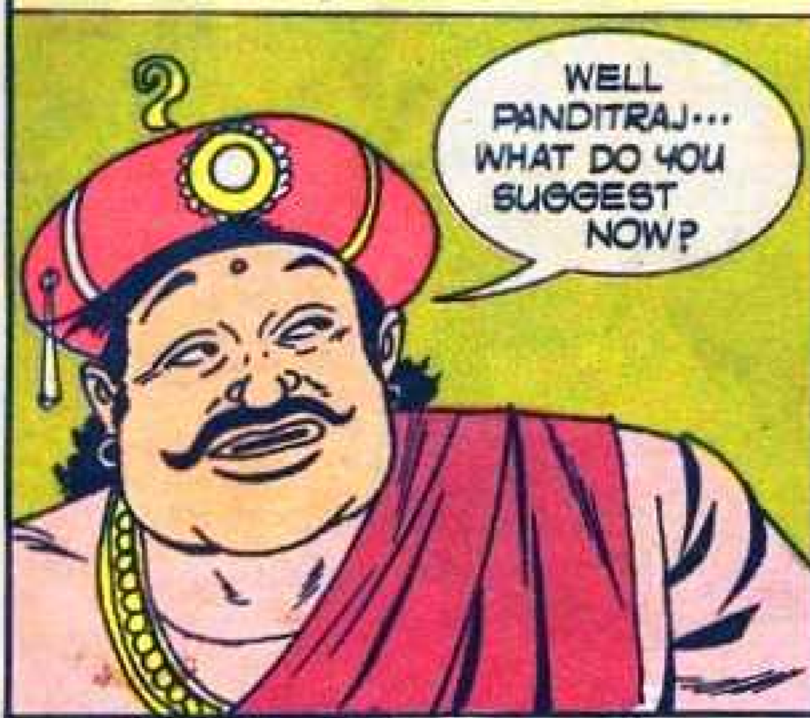

WH - WHERE IS HE?
I'D LIKE TO KNOW.
RIGHT HERE, FRIENDS.


STAND UP, YOU ROGUE! WE'LL KILL YOU WITHOUT FAIL THIS TIME.


NOW, NOW! REMEMBER THE KING'S ORDERS? "CUT OFF HIS HEAD WITH **ONE** SWEEP OF YOUR SWORD!"


YOU'LL HAVE TO GET HIS PERMISSION FOR A SECOND TRY.
ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! LET'S GO TO THE KING THEN.


SO RAMAN WAS TAKEN TO THE KING.
WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
WHY HAVEN'T YOU EXECUTED HIM?


WHEN THE KING WAS TOLD WHY—
WELL PANDITRAJ... WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST NOW?


LET RAMAN BE BURIED UP TO HIS NECK AND BE TRAMPLED TO DEATH BY AN ELEPHANT.
GO! DO AS HE SAYS!


AM I GOING TO LOSE YOU, RAMAN? I CAN'T SEE HOW YOU'LL GET OUT OF THIS ONE.


THE GUARDS TOOK RAMAN TO THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY AND BEGAN TO DIG THE GROUND.


AT LAST THE PIT WAS READY.
GET IN THERE! AND NONE OF YOUR TRICKS THIS TIME.
MY FRIENDS, I KNOW WHEN TO ACCEPT DEFEAT.


RAMAN ENTERED THE PIT AND THE GUARDS SEALED HIM IN WITH MUD.


NOW, LET'S HAVE LUNCH AND COME BACK WITH THE ELEPHANT.


AREN'T ONE OF YOU GOING TO STAY BACK AND STAND GUARD?
THERE'S NO NEED TO. YOU CAN'T RUN AWAY.


I WON'T. BUT I MAY BE RUN OVER BY A CHARIOT OR...


HE! HE! HE! HE'S WORRIED ABOUT BEING RUN OVER!
WE WILL SOON PUT AN END TO ALL YOUR WORRIES.


MOTHER KALI, ONLY YOU CAN SAVE ME NOW. IF ONLY SOME ONE WOULD PASS THIS WAY....


AS IF IN ANSWER TO HIS PRAYER, A WASHERMAN CAME BY.
AM I SEEING THINGS? OR IS THAT THE HEAD OF A MAN?


IT IS! HE MUST BE A YOGI.


THE WASHERMAN WALKED UP TO RAMAN—
GURU MAHARAJ, I SEEK YOUR BLESSINGS.
THANK YOU, O GODDESS!


MY FRIEND, WHO AM I TO BLESS YOU? I AM AN ORDINARY WASHERMAN LIKE YOU.
A WASHERMAN! THEN WHY HAVE YOU BURIED YOURSELF LIKE THIS?


I AM UNDER TREATMENT. I AM A HUNCHBACK.
BUT SURELY, THERE'S NO REMEDY FOR THAT!


THERE IS, MY FRIEND— A SIMPLE ONE. BURY YOURSELF LIKE THIS FOR AN HOUR; AND YOU WILL WALK ERECT.
I DON'T BELIEVE YOU.


WHY DON'T YOU HELP ME GET OUT OF THIS PIT AND SEE FOR YOURSELF.


THE WASHERMAN BEGAN TO DIG UP THE SOIL AROUND RAMAN.


WHEN RAMAN CAME OUT OF THE PIT—
I CAN'T BELIEVE IT!
AMAZING, ISN'T IT? I TOO CARRIED HEAVY LOADS. I TOO HAD BECOME DEFORMED. I TOO USED TO STOOP AS YOU DO. THEN A LEARNED PHYSICIAN SUGGESTED THIS TREATMENT.


MY GOOD FRIEND, CAN I TRY IT TOO?


WHY NOT? ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS STAND IN A PIT WITH MUD PACKED AROUND YOU.
THEN I'LL STAND IN THIS VERY PIT.




WILL YOU FILL IN THE MUD?
CERTAINLY. IT WOULD BE A PLEASURE TO BE OF HELP TO YOU.


REMEMBER, YOU WILL HAVE TO REMAIN IN THE PIT FOR AT LEAST AN HOUR.
OH DEAR! I HAVE TO DELIVER THOSE CLOTHES TO THE PALACE.


DON'T WORRY. I'LL DELIVER THEM FOR YOU.
WHAT A GOOD MAN YOU ARE, MY FRIEND! I DON'T KNOW HOW TO THANK YOU!




ON HIS WAY TO THE PALACE, RAMAN PASSED THE GUARDS WHO WERE RETURNING WITH THE ELEPHANT.
HURRY UP, THE QUEEN IS WAITING FOR THE CLOTHES.
THANK GOD! THEY HAVEN'T RECOGNISED ME!
I AM WALKING AS FAST AS I CAN, SIR.


LATER, AT THE PIT—


AN ELEPHANT! I HOPE THE MAHOUT CAN SEE ME.


THERE HE IS. SEE THAT THE ELEPHANT DOES NOT MISS HIM.
HE WON'T!


MY GOD! HE'S HEADING FOR ME.

HELP! HELP!

HEY! THAT ISN'T RAMAN. I KNOW HIS VOICE.

THE GUARDS RAN FORWARD —

HELP! HELP!

WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

I AM UNDER TREATMENT. A LEARNED PHYSICIAN SUGGESTED IT TO MY FRIEND. ALL ONE HAS TO DO IS....

YES, YES. BUT WHERE IS RAMAN?

YOU MEAN, THE KIND YOUNG WASHERMAN WHO LET ME USE THIS PIT? HE HAS TAKEN THE LAUNDRY TO THE PALACE FOR ME.

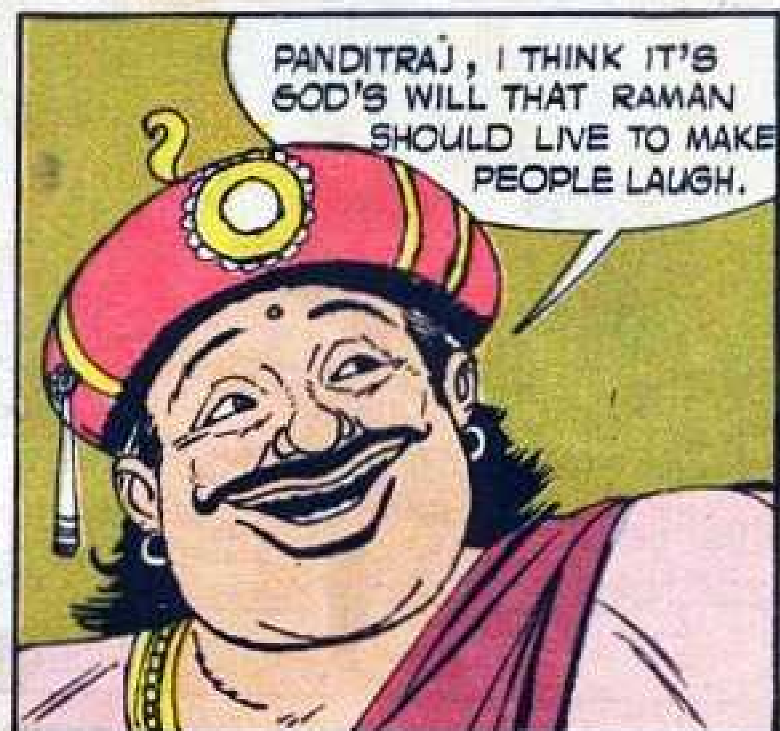
YOU MEAN... NO! THE SCOUNDREL HAS TRICKED US AGAIN!

MY FRIEND? A SCOUNDREL? IMPOSSIBLE. HE IS A GOOD MAN...


YOU FOOL! HE IS A SCOUNDREL! HE WAS TO BE TRAMPLED TO DEATH BY THIS ELEPHANT.
I DON'T UNDERSTAND.


THEN THE GUARDS HELPED THE POOR WASHERMAN TO COME OUT OF THE PIT.
MY BACK! IT'S STILL BENT!
IT WILL BE BROKEN, IF THE EMPEROR HEARS THAT YOU HELPED RAMAN ESCAPE.


HOWEVER, WHEN THE KING DID HEAR ABOUT IT—
HA! HA! WASN'T THAT CLEVER OF HIM, PANDITRAJ?
BUT MAHARAJ...


PANDITRAJ, I THINK IT'S GOD'S WILL THAT RAMAN SHOULD LIVE TO MAKE PEOPLE LAUGH.


JUST THEN A MERCHANT FROM ARABIA ENTERED THE COURT.
YOUR MAJESTY, I HAVE SOME STRONG, SWIFT-FOOTED, ARABIAN HORSES FOR SALE. THE FINEST HORSES IN THE WORLD!

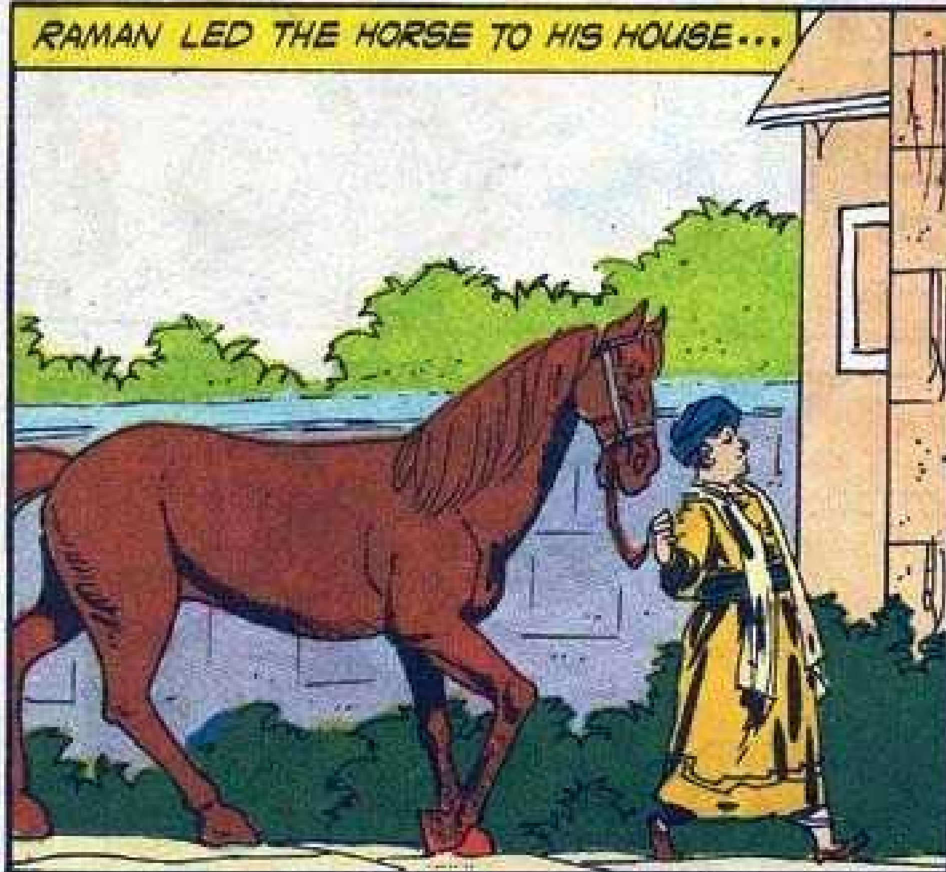

YOU WILL NEVER FIND BETTER HORSES THAN THOSE I'VE BROUGHT.
THEN SEND THE LOT TO ME.

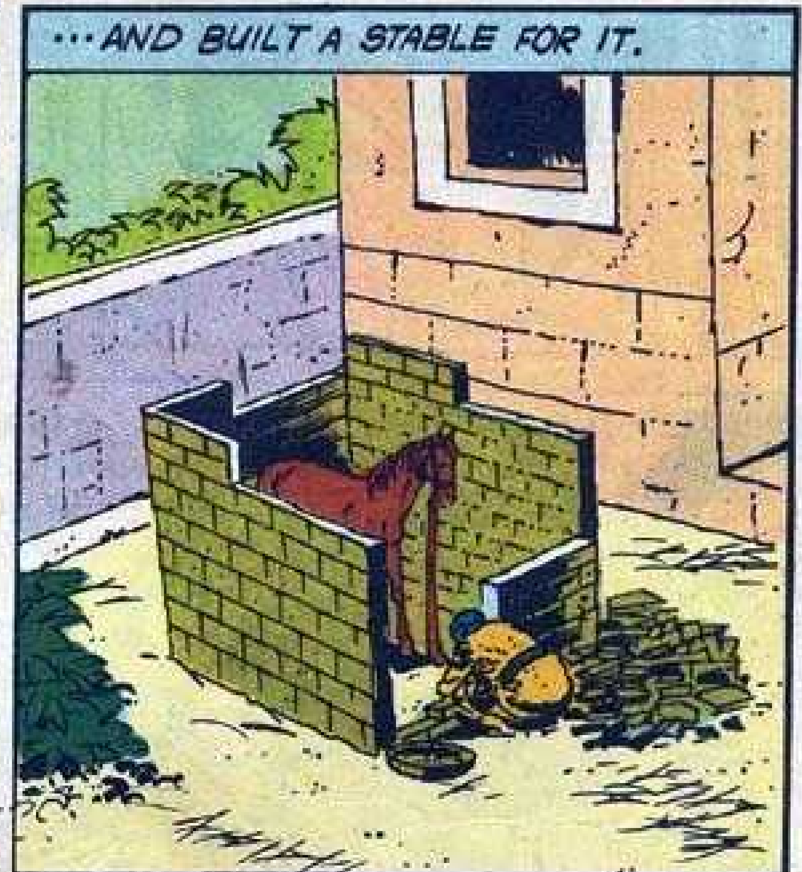

THE KING ALLOTTED A HORSE TO EACH COURTIER.
I WANT YOU TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOUR HORSES AND HAVE THEM TRAINED. ONE MONTH FROM TODAY, A RACE WILL BE HELD. THE MASTER OF THE WINNER WILL BE HANDSOMELY REWARDED.


AFTER THE COURTIERS HAD LED AWAY THEIR HORSES —
MAHARAJ, WHY HAVEN'T I BEEN ALLOTTED ONE?


WHAT WOULD A FOOL KNOW ABOUT TRAINING HORSES! THAT'S WHY!
PANDITRAJ IS RIGHT, RAMAN. I DON'T THINK YOU WILL BE ABLE TO TRAIN A HORSE.


PLEASE, LET ME TRY, MAHARAJ. I AM CONFIDENT I'LL SUCCEED. PLEASE GIVE ME A CHANCE.
HM— M— M. ALL RIGHT. PANDITRAJ, LET RAMAN BE GIVEN A HORSE TOO.


RAMAN LED THE HORSE TO HIS HOUSE...


...AND BUILT A STABLE FOR IT.


IT WAS A STRANGE STABLE, WALLED IN ON ALL SIDES WITH JUST ONE WEE WINDOW...


...THROUGH WHICH RAMAN FED IT ITS DAILY RATION OF HAY.

A MONTH LATER, THE COURTIERS CAME WITH THEIR HORSES, ALL SET FOR THE RACE.

ARE ALL THE HORSES HERE?

ALL BUT RAMAN'S, MAHARAJ. I KNEW HE...

RAMAN, WHERE IS THE HORSE?

MAHARAJ, IT'S SUCH A FIERCE BEAST, THAT I DARE NOT GO NEAR IT.

I DON'T BELIEVE HIM, MAHARAJ. HE'S ASHAMED OF HIS HORSE. THAT'S WHY HE HASN'T BROUGHT IT.

IS THAT SO?

MAHARAJ, I DON'T LIE. PLEASE BELIEVE ME. I DARE NOT GO NEAR IT.

THAT'S JUST AN EXCUSE, MAHARAJ. FOR ALL WE KNOW HE MIGHT HAVE SOLD IT.

MAHARAJ, I AM HURT. IF PANDITRAJ DOES NOT BELIEVE ME, LET HIM COME AND SEE FOR HIMSELF.

GO, PANDITRAJ, AND BRING THE HORSE HERE.


TO BE SURE I WILL, MAHARAJ. I'LL PERSONALLY LEAD IT HERE. IF IT'S STILL THERE!


PANDITRAJ WENT WITH RAMAN.
WHERE IS IT?
THERE! IN THAT STABLE I MADE SPECIALLY FOR IT.


YOU FOOL, DO YOU CALL THAT A STABLE?
PANDITRAJ, PLEASE DON'T BE ANGRY. I AM NOT A LEARNED MAN. I DON'T KNOW BETTER.


LET ME SEE THE HORSE.
THIS WAY. YOU CAN SEE IT THROUGH THIS WINDOW. BUT TAKE CARE.


THE MOMENT PANDITRAJ PUT HIS HEAD INTO THE WINDOW...


...THE STARVING ANIMAL GRABBED HIS BEARD, MISTAKING IT FOR HAY!


OW-W-W!


RAMAN! HELP ME!
I DAREN'T. AND YOU CAN'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU.

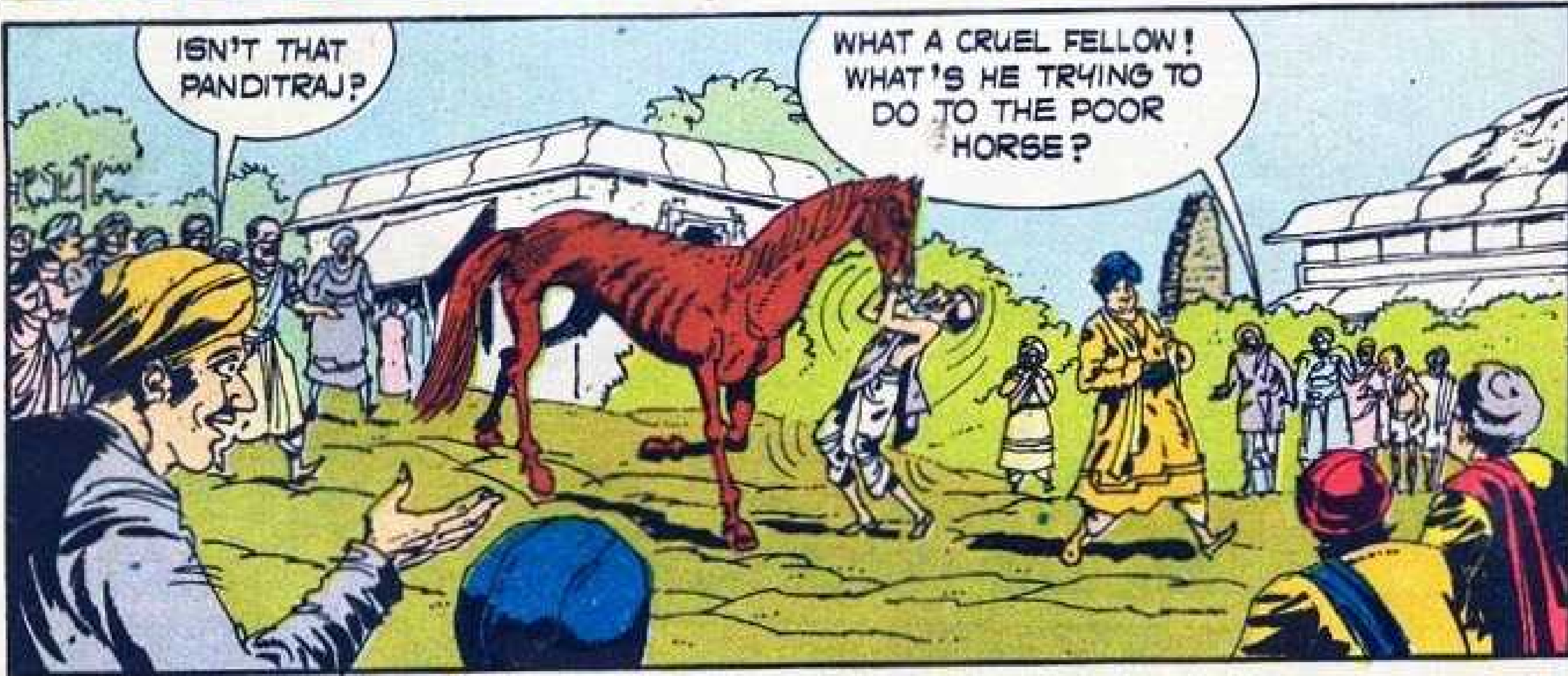

ATTRACTED BY THE COMMOTION, A CROWD SOON COLLECTED.
WE'LL HAVE TO BREAK THAT WALL DOWN. THERE'S NO ALTERNATIVE.
THEN LET'S BREAK IT.




AT LAST THE WALLS WERE HACKED DOWN. BUT—
THE WRETCHED BEAST WON'T LET GO! WHAT SHALL I DO?


PANDITRAJ, IT'S THE KING'S HORSE. ONLY HE CAN DECIDE WHAT'S TO BE DONE.
AND YOU'VE PROMISED THAT YOU WOULD PERSONALLY LEAD IT TO THE PALACE.


BUT NOT BY MY BEARD!
THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE. LET'S GO.


ISN'T THAT PANDITRAJ?
WHAT A CRUEL FELLOW! WHAT'S HE TRYING TO DO TO THE POOR HORSE?


AT LAST THE PROCESSION REACHED THE PALACE GROUNDS.
MAHARAJ, MY HORSE.


HA! HA! HA!
MAHARAJ, PLEASE RELEASE ME FROM THE JAWS OF THIS VICIOUS CREATURE.


PANDITRAJ, NOW DO YOU BELIEVE ME?
I DO! I DO!


RAMAN! ENOUGH OF YOUR PRANKS!
I BEG YOUR PARDON, MAHARAJ.


YOU THERE! GET ME A BUNDLE OF HAY.

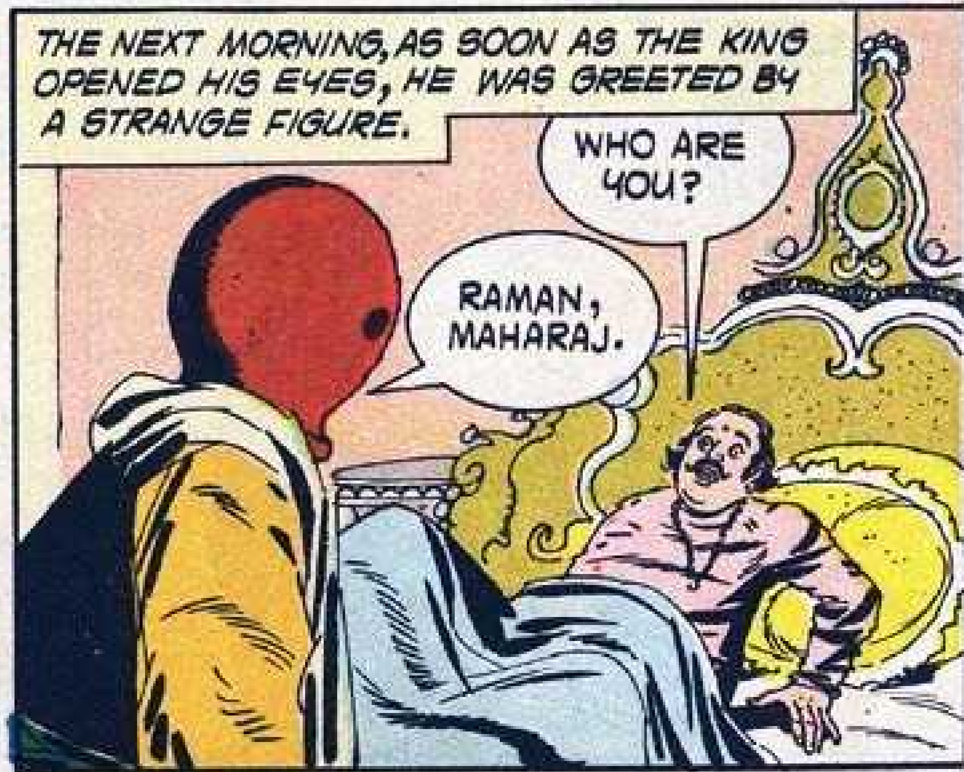

WHEN THE HAY WAS BROUGHT—

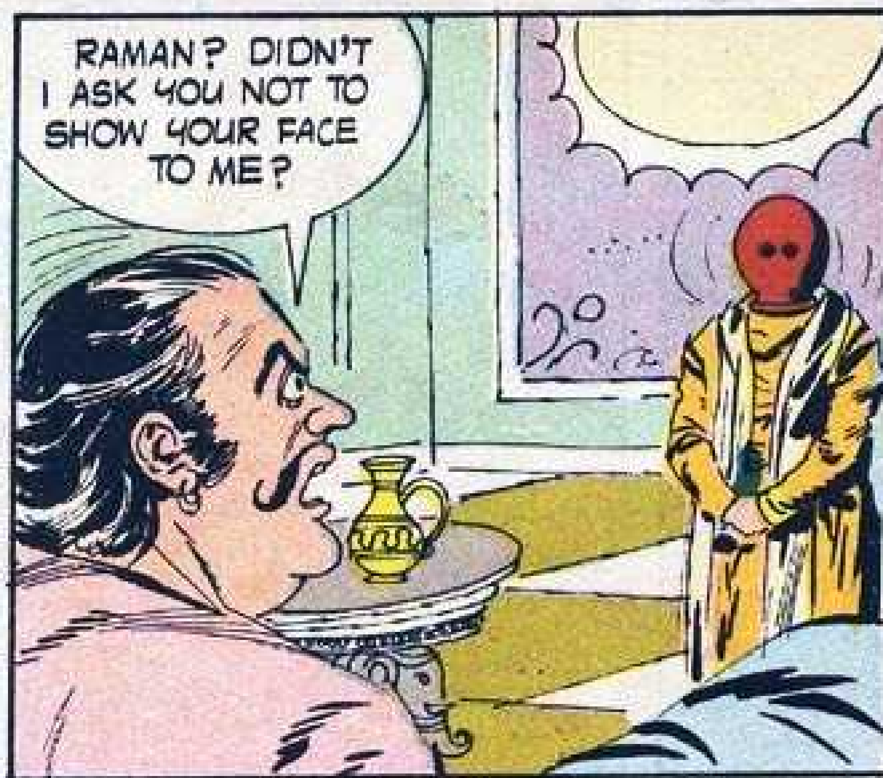


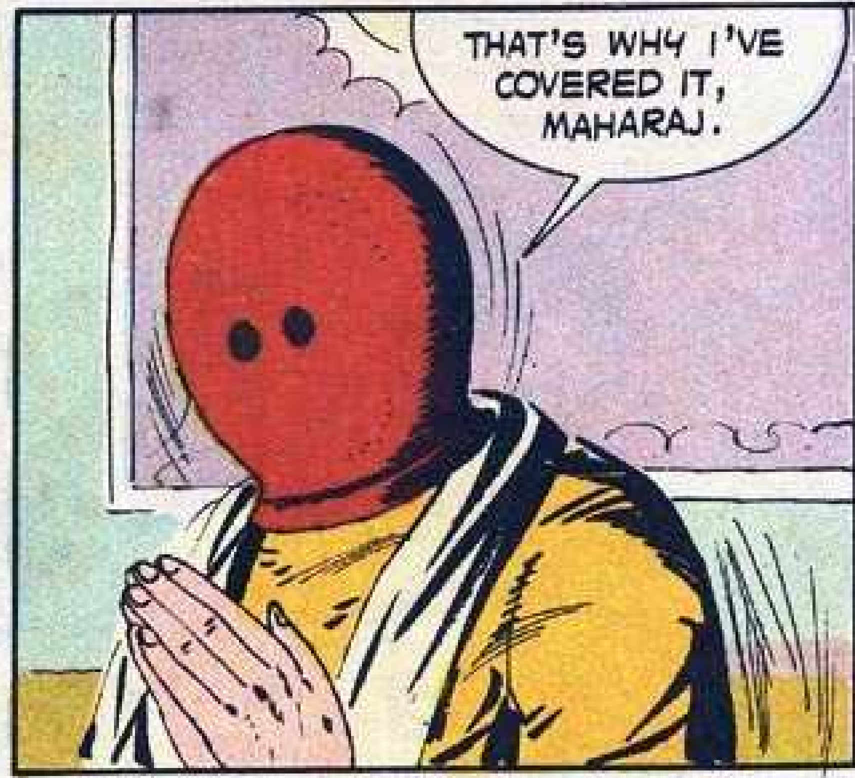

CLEVER RAMAN HAS SCORED AGAIN! YET I MUST PACIFY PANDITRAJ.


RAMAN, YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAR THIS TIME. DON'T EVER SHOW ME YOUR FACE AGAIN.
AS YOU COMMAND, MAHARAJ.


HM-M-M! I'VE SENT HIM AWAY. BUT I'M GOING TO MISS HIM.


THE NEXT MORNING, AS SOON AS THE KING OPENED HIS EYES, HE WAS GREETED BY A STRANGE FIGURE.
WHO ARE YOU?
RAMAN, MAHARAJ.


RAMAN? DIDN'T I ASK YOU NOT TO SHOW YOUR FACE TO ME?


THAT'S WHY I'VE COVERED IT, MAHARAJ.


THE KING COULD NOT HELP LAUGHING.
HA! HA! RAMAN, IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO BE ANGRY WITH YOU.


THE KING HIMSELF REMOVED THE POT THAT COVERED RAMAN'S FACE.
THE GODS THEMSELVES CANNOT OUTWIT YOU, RAMAN. MAY YOU LIVE LONG!

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The world's largest animal is the *blue whale*–106 ft long, and weighing 195 tons.

The world's saltiest sea is the *Dead Sea*, between Jordan and Israel. The water is so thick that you can sit on it!





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